A Remarkable Chain Tale from New Guinea

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ABSTRACT

Although chain tales have been recorded in many parts of the world and have been the subject of systematic study, they are either extremely rare in New Guinea, or they have largely escaped the attention of those who recorded its oral literature. The chain tale presented here is the only New Guinean one that has come to my attention. What makes it remarkable is that three almost identical variants were recorded in geographically widely separated areas in languages that are at best only distantly related. The question of how to explain this similarity is broached but alas not answered because of the dearth of data.

1 Introduction

It has been a long time since I met Karl for the last time, and the invitation to contribute to a festschrift for him came as a pleasant surprise. Karl was my first Ph.D. student; our initial contact dates from June, 1967. I was a young research fellow at the Australian National University and in the middle of my first fieldwork in the Western District of Papua New Guinea when I received a letter from Karl informing me that I had been appointed as his supervisor. We actually met a few months later in Canberra after my return from the field.1 In the following years we did not meet very often. Karl’s work was in the highlands, mine in the lowlands, and only occasionally our paths crossed, as in 1971 when I was Karl and Joyce’s guest at Ukarumpa, Eastern Highlands District (the Summer Institute of Linguistics’ site in Papua New Guinea) for a few days, and

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1I may have been a bit hard on Karl then, as we represented two very different theoretical frameworks. I was a European structural linguist, Karl a Pikean Tagmemicist, and our viewpoints did not always coincide. But Karl weathered all storms and his dissertation, A Grammar and dialect Study of Kewa, New Guinea (Franklin 1969) still has its respected place on my bookshelf.
in 1973 when I collaborated with Karl on a chapter in a volume he was editing: *The linguistic situation in the Gulf District and adjacent areas, Papua New Guinea* (Franklin and Voorhoeve 1973). Late in the 1970s, when fieldwork became increasingly difficult in Papua New Guinea, I shifted my research to eastern Indonesia, and we lost touch altogether.

What should one write for an old friend one hasn’t seen for such a long time? Luckily, I learned that his most recent focus is on folktales and oral storytelling, a field I am keenly interested in myself. As it happened, just before our first contact I had recorded a so-called chain tale that puzzled me very much because it was so similar to a chain tale I recorded much earlier in the Asmat area of what was then Netherlands New Guinea. At the time, however, I was fully occupied with descriptive and comparative work, so the topic of chain tales was shelved. At last, Karl’s festschrift has provided the stimulus to take it up again.

2 Chain tales

A snake is hit on the head by a falling fruit
The snake calls a rat to eat the fruit
The fruit calls the fire to burn the rat
The rat calls the rain to put out the fire
The rain falls down.

In a chain tale the first event or episode triggers a second one, the second triggers a third, and so forth: A > B > C > D …. In one type of tale the succession of events just stops at a certain point; in other tales the series of events leads back to the initial one: A > B > C > D > A …, or at a certain point is reversed: A > B > C > D > C > B > A. The tale that will concern us here is of the first type. In a stripped-down version as I have given it above, and in the following, I shall discuss three variants, two recorded by myself and one I happened to come across in a large collection of folk tales. The main difference between these variants lies in their function. One of them is just a children's story; the other two each form the first part of a larger story, leading up to respectively a flood story and a story about the origin of fire.

3 First variant

The first variant I recorded in November, 1960 in the government station Agats in the Asmat area of West New Guinea. My informant was a student at the local mission school. It is a children’s story that was told to him by his mother when he was a small boy.\(^2\) Specific notes to the glosses follow the text.\(^3\)

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\(^2\)I included this text in my description of the Flamingo Bay dialect of Asmat (Voorhoeve 1965:186-187), presenting the Asmat text alongside an English translation without further notes.

\(^3\)The spelling is phonemic except for (b, mb, m) and (d, nd, n) which are allophones of the complex phonemes /m/ and /n/ respectively. The /c/ is a voiceless alveo-palatal stop, and /r/ can be a flap or a trill. Stress is indicated by an acute accent over the stressed vowel.
(1) Baciw bu a-mbu-áms-er in. snake SPECIES water IND(1)-bathe-lie.down-NP(3SG)(2) QUOTE(3)

‘A baciw snake was resting after bathing.’

(2) Ám ek ar-ám op yirán á-e-tep-er in. am fruit he-CONTRAST(4) above ripe IND-do-hang-NP(3SG) QUOTE

‘Above, an am fruit⁴ was hanging, ripening.’

(3) Baciw a! ó na árpuk a! baciw EXCLAM 2SG FOC(5) out.of.the.way EXCLAM

‘Hey, baciw! Get out of the way, you!’

(4) Do a mbaré “yirán b-e-kurúm bo-kóy-ndi 1SG here already ripe INF(6) -do-completely INF-come.loose-go.down e-mbí a-yí-por-á e-r opák in. do-PRES-1SG IND-say-see-REPET do-NP(3SG) not QUOTE

‘I here am already about to become fully ripe and fall down, he said again and again, but with no success.’


‘He (the snake) (said): “Why don’t you make it a habit of dropping down when you are alone?”’

(6) Á ow m-ambís maserim car bo-kóy-ndi-ewer-éyi here somebody INF-lying.down then 2PL INF-RED-come.loose-go.down-HAB-REPET aráw an? iním a-e-r in. NEC(8) QUESTION thus IND-do/say-NP(3SG) QUOTE

‘“Do you always have to drop down when somebody is lying here?” thus he spoke.’

(7) Á, em-ém-ams-er-em iním a-e-r in. well PFV(9)-go-lie.down-NP(2SG) thus IND-do/say-NP(3SG) QUOTE

‘“Well, you have already lain down,” (i.e., as you are staying there..) thus (the fruit) said.’

(8) Am ék op ew tep-koy-ér cowák mbi-sa ndambí am fruit above from hang-come.NP(3SG) at.once nose-back in.a.bunch a-ndi-yám-tiw-er in. IND-go.down-big-put.down-NP(3SG) QUOTE

‘At once the am fruit fell down from above in a bunch and hit him heavily on the back of the nose.’

(9) Uwú mbi a uwú mbi a! iním a-e-r in. ouch nose EXCLAM ouch nose EXCLAM thus IND-do/say-NP(3SG) QUOTE

‘“Ouch, my nose! Ouch, my nose!” thus he (the snake) said.’

⁴Unidentified, but described to me as similar to a mango.
(10) Pér, asé ew sir-ac-ém am ék m-an in yis-ap-céy!
rat bush from run-A NT_{10}^{SG} am fruit INF-eat PURP_{11}^{PURP} go.out-sit-IMP_{12}^{IMP}
iním a-e-r
thus IND-do/say-NP(3SG) QUOTE
"Rat, you should run out of the bush and sit down to eat the am fruit," thus he said.'

(11) Per áp-sir-er cowák am ék m-an in á-yis-ap-er in.
rat sit-run-NP(3SG) at.once am fruit INF-eat PURP IND-go.out-sit-NP(3SG) QUOTE
'Immediately the rat started running and sat down to eat the am fruit.'

(12) Wa, yismák a per fa-m-tiw-fc! iním a-e-r
hey fire this rat burn-CAUS-put.down thus IND-do/say-NP(3SG) QUOTE
"Hey, fire, burn this rat," (the fruit) said.'

(13) Yismák per sesésé a-óm-om-at-er in.
fire rat singeing IND-start-walk-GV_{13}^{NP(3SG)} QUOTE
'The fire started walking to the rat while singeing it.'

(14) Te mumbú a-ne-mb-úc a iním a-e-r
rain heavy IND-fall.down-CAUS-IMP EXCLAM thus IND-do/say-NP(3SG) QUOTE
"Downpour, fall down!" he (the rat) said.'

(15) Te mumbú a-ne-mb-or in.
rain heavy IND-fall.down-CAUS-NP(3SG) QUOTE
'A heavy rain fell.'

(16) Baré opák.
finished no.more
'That's all.'

NOTES to the glosses:
(1) The prefix a-, glossed IND for INDICATIVE, following Drabbe 1959: §59, is not easy to characterize. It seems to be a default prefix when none of the semantically "loaded" prefixes occur. It may be omitted, as in (12), (14) and (15), without semantic consequences.
(2) The 3SG marker for the Near/Mythical Past is Zero; compare –er-em NP2SG and er-es NP3PL.
(3) The sentence-final particle in/un is glossed QUOTE; it is an evidential marker, not uncommon cross-linguistically, marking utterances for which the speaker has no direct evidence, such as all sentences in a story like this.
(4) –am in the anaphoric pronoun arám serves to highlight the change of Subject 'he (on the other hand').' (Voorhoeve 1965, §245).
(5) The focus marker is na/nat, providing some emphasis to the preceding pronoun or noun phrase.
(6) The verbal prefix /m(V)-/, realized phonetically as [b(V)-] or [m(V)-], indicates an INFINITIVE form when used in isolation. Together with an inflected form of the verb e ‘do’, it is used to express intention or an imminent event. Note that here two INF-forms go with one inflected form of e.
(7) The pronominal suffix –ap/pa expresses that one does something on one’s own, i.e., alone, when nobody else is around. The suffixed form can be followed by min, which seems to stress the fact that nobody else is there.
(8) Araw, followed by the question marker an and following an INF verb form, expresses that the necessity to perform the action expressed by the verb is questioned (Voorhoeve 1965, §245).
The prefix *em(V)*- indicates a perfective aspect.

The suffix –ac is labelled ANTERIOR (Voorhoeve 1965, § 114, 115); it indicates that the action precedes that of the following verb. Verbs with –ac occur mostly sentence medially, but can occur sentence-finally as adhortative or imperative forms, as in *bar atow e-ac-om at*! ball play do-first-we EXCLAMATION – “Let’s first play football!”

The QUOTE marker in, preceded by an INF verb and followed by an inflected verb form, indicates that the action expressed by the first verb is the purpose of the action expressed by the second. It can be translated by ‘in order to’.

An imperative form with –cey is more polite and not as domineering as the IMP forms with –i(c).

-at- is a generic verb, occurring with quite a few noun-complements: *cembeu -at-* ‘to abuse sb.’, *owen -at-* ‘to fight’, etc. I find the form *om-om-at* difficult to gloss. *Em-em* means ‘set out walking’. With an “infix” -o-, it becomes *om-om* ‘set out walking while doing something’, and that something, in this case, is *sesese -at-* ‘to singe, scorch’.

### 4 Second variant

The second variant I recorded in May 1967 when I was stationed at Nomad Patrol post in the then Western District of Papua for an initial survey of the languages in the Nomad sub-district. The contact language in the Western District was a local variant of Hiri Motu, but at that time there were only a few young men in the Nomad sub-district who had acquired a working knowledge of it. Those who were most fluent in Hiri Motu worked as interpreters for the Government at the Nomad patrol post. One of them, Dina, from the Pare language area across the Strickland River, was willing to work for me as an informant for his language. He was eager, but unsophisticated, so that progress on his mother tongue was slow and often hampered by the limitations of Hiri Motu as a contact language. But he was a good story teller, and as I was interested in oral literature, he told me several Pa folktales. For my benefit he did this in Hiri Motu; the Pa originals would have been beyond my grasp. When he told me the tale of the goanna that is hit by a fruit and then calls a rat to eat the fruit, etc., I was struck by its similarity to the story presented above, and I asked him to summarize the story for me in his own language. However, the rough translation we then worked out contains so many uncertainties and gaps that it is unfit for presentation here. The following is a free translation of the Hiri Motu version:

This is an old story. Our ancestors used to tell it, and it goes like this. A goanna was sitting on the trunk of a tree. While he was sitting there, a blackpalm fruit fell down on the ground. The goanna was amazed, “Hey, what was that, falling down?” But he stayed where he was. Then another blackpalm fruit fell down. He went to have a look. “Oh,” he said when he saw them, “those are the things that gave me a fright!” He went back, but then he thought, “I’ll do something else.”

And he went back to the place where the fruit were falling. He found the blackpalm and climbed up its trunk. Then he said, “Hey, who are you trying to hit all the time? You fruit are not people, are you?” And then he said, “Come and hit me! If you are really something, come down!”

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5Now: Western Province.
6Hiri Motu, or Police Motu as it was called back in 1967, is a pidginized form of the Austronesian Motu language spoken around Port Moresby.
The fruit said, “Ah, this man tells me to hit him!” And it continued, “You should stand quite close to the trunk!”

But when it fell down to hit the goanna, the latter moved to the other side (of the tree). “You cannot hit me!” A fruit on that side was ripe and fell, but the goanna again moved to the other side. “You cannot hit me!” So it went on, but then a fruit on the goanna’s side pretended to fall down, and when he went to the other side, a fruit on that side fell straight down and hit the goanna. “Ouch!” He was in great pain! “Why did you trick me and hit me?” he cried.

He was in great pain, crying and rolling over and over on the ground, and then he called out to the rat, one, two, three times. “Rat, where are you? Come and look at this fruit, this fruit hit me!”

Then the rat came running, grabbed the fruit and started gnawing away—krek,krek,krek....

“Ouch, don’t kill me; please, let me go!” Then the fruit called out: “Fire! Come and burn this rat!”

The fire set out and came, burning the trees wherever it went, erratically, all over the plains and the hills. The rat and goanna both ran away, but there was no way out. They ran in circles, and finally the fire overtook them. “What shall we do,” they both cried, and then they called the rain, “Hey, rain, flood, come down here and put out the fire! Quick, it’s almost killing us!”

Up in the sky there was thunder and lightning on all sides, and a heavy rain fell down. When the rain fell, a flood came down, tearing away the forest on all sides. And when it came, it took with it both the rat and the goanna, and the blackpalm fruit floated away.

But in Pa this is not the end of the story. The rain does not stop, but causes a flood which submerges the whole world, drowning every living being on it, except for two brother-sister couples who have a premonition of what is going to happen. They save themselves on a hastily built raft; first they are carried away with the current, but then they succeed in tying their raft to the top of an immensely tall tree reaching almost to the clouds. There they stay till the waters have receded. After some time two giants pass them; the first one comes from the mountains, the second from the sea. When the giants have changed places, the earth is again ready for habitation. The two young men now exchange sisters, marrying them, and they repopulate the earth. They are the ancestors of all the tribes living in the Nomad sub-district.

5 Third variant

The third variant I found very recently in a large collection of more than 1200 folktales originally published in the newspaper Wantok between 1972 and 1997 (Slone 2001:19). It was first published in the Wantok issue of 21 November 1973. The story was written down by a Gope student at Kerema High School in the Gulf District. As the story is too long to include here I have summarized it:

On the sea shore, under a mangrove root, a small mud crab is asleep. It has just moulted, and its shell is still soft. Suddenly, the crab is rudely awakened by a falling mangrove fruit that has hit him on his new shell. The crab cries out, “Rat, come here and eat this

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7The Hiri Motu version of this part of the story was published in Dutton and Voorhoeve 1974:182–183.
8I mention this detail here because mythical beings who move from the mountains to the sea and vice versa are also found in Asmat mythology. It is still unclear what their role is or what forces they represent.
9The Gope area lies at the top of the Papuan Gulf and the language spoken there is North Eastern Kiwai.
mangrove fruit! It has damaged my new shell!” Soon a rat arrives and starts eating the fruit. The fruit now cries out, “Fire, come and help me; burn this rat who is trying to eat me!” The fire comes and scorches the rat, who cries out, “Water, where are you! Come and put out this fire that is burning my hair!” Then the water (rain) comes and tries to extinguish the fire.

And again, as in the Pa version, the story continues. The fire gets help from a snake who carries it away to the Gope people who up till that time had not known about the use of fire.10

6 Discussion

So we have here three strikingly similar chain tales; all three seem part of an old oral tradition, handed down in languages that not only are geographically far apart, but also not closely related at all. Asmat is a member of the Asmat-Kamoro Family, and Pa is a member of the Awin-Pa Family. On a higher level, the two families are related; both are members of the proposed Central and South New Guinea subgroup of the Trans New Guinea family. Even more distant is the relationship of Asmat and Pa with North-Eastern Kiwai, the language of the Gope area. NE Kiwai is a member of the Kiwai Family, which may also belong to the Trans New Guinea family (Ross 2005:37).

Given the geographic and linguistic distance between the tales, how can their similarity be explained? When comparing the three tales, my first impression was that they seem to have an internal logic that would make them resistant to change, at least in their basic structure. I found this confirmed in a collection of Indian folktales by A. K. Ramanujan (1997, chapter 8) in which he says, “Chain tales are accumulative tales with a stricter narrative logic: every additional episode is dependent on the previous one.” He quotes an earlier study of the folktale by Stith Thompson in which she observes,

A much more definite narrative core is found in the cumulative tale [of which the chain tale forms a sub-group—CLV]. Something of the nature of a game is also present here, since the accumulating repetitions must be recited exactly, but in the central situation many of these tales maintain their form unchanged over long periods of history and in very diverse environments. (Thompson 1946:230)11

If such a resistance to change is common to all chain tales, the three variants presented here can be the result of a long history of borrowing across language boundaries. But it is also possible that they were handed down for thousands of years from one “proto form” in a language ancestral to Asmat, Pa and NE Kiwai. And naturally the latter process does not exclude the first.

According to Thompson and Ramanujan, whose studies took them all the way from North America through Europe and the Middle East to India, chain tales are a kind of game, and a form of amusement for children as well as grown-ups. This certainly is the case with the Asmat version which has no connection with

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10A slightly different version of the same story, I found later, was published in 1974 by Kristen Press, Madang in a booklet entitled Creation Legends from New Guinea, 19–22 (The Crab and the Fire, by Oriu Gemo).

11A second edition of her study has appeared in 1977, but I had only access to the first one of 1946.
either flood or fire or any other mythical theme. In Pa and NE Kiwai, however, the chain tale forms the upbeat, as it were, to a much more serious myth of origin. It is perhaps worth investigating whether there is something in the nature of chain tales that makes them important as an introduction to myths of origin, and to myths in general, that may have had a sacred character. But before we can begin such an investigation, we should have more chain tales to work with. It is remarkable that the three tales recorded so far are all basically one and the same story. Are there no other chain tales to be found in New Guinea oral literature? Did they perhaps escape attention or were they not thought worthy of being written down? Perhaps Karl can help us out!

References


